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Maintaining Mental Health During Holidays Important

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By Lt. Steven Fernandez, Head of Naval Hospital Jacksonville, Fla., Mental Health

While it is a myth that the suicide rate jumps around the holidays, the stress of the holidays can lead to neglecting the basic things that help us feel good: diet, exercise, rest, and peace of mind.

Taking care of our mental health—a subject near and dear to my heart—is something that people tend to neglect during the holidays, along with diet, exercise, and sleep. Not taking care of ourselves leads to stress, irritability, fatigue, sleep problems, indulgent eating, loss of enthusiasm and feelings of detachment and angst. Stressed out people have a hard time enjoying things, since they can feel like they're going through the motions, or get distracted from the present moment because they're preoccupied with what they're worrying about. It's hard to feel like this is "the most wonderful time of the year", when we're busy worrying about money, finances, family, travel, cooking, shopping and other activities that come with the season.

Lt. Steven Fernandez, Naval Hospital Jacksonville, Fla.

An American Psychological Association survey shows the number one stressor during the

holidays is lack of money or financial stress. Coming in at number two is the pressure of gift giving. Plus, we're heading into a time of year where family get-togethers are unavoidable, and this can resurrect old family conflicts. And negotiating family obligations and visits can make travel a lot more stressful.

Here are some simple steps people can take to make this time of year less stressful:

Take time for yourself. Spending just 10 minutes, without distractions, may refresh you enough to handle everything you need to do. Go for a walk, look at holiday lights, take a bath, or unplug!

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February 2015 (16)

January 2015 (12)

December 2014 (17)

Get organized! It's easy to feel overwhelmed. Make a list, check it twice, and make sure you've got things prioritized correctly. Try to separate what you can control and what is outside of your control.

Don't forget diet and exercise. Overeating or neglecting your fitness around this time can lead to feelings of guilt or poor body image.

Don't skip meals. Being hungry can make you irritable and prone to overeating. And eating healthy snacks when you can will help keep you sharp.

Reach out. If you feel lonely or isolated, seek out community, spiritual, other social events – even volunteering — to lift your spirits. If your list is too long, delegate and ask for help.

Get some sleep. Skimping on sleep to get everything done can lead to problems from irritability, dangerous driving, to an increased susceptibility to illness and viruses.

Protect yourself. With all the increased travelling, colder weather, and stress, be sure to wash your hands or use hand sanitizer if you can. Get your flu shot! Stay hydrated, and don't forget your multivitamin!

And be sure to keep an eye on your shipmate. We say this in the Navy to remind people to watch out for their friends, colleagues and loved ones. Don't forget those with loved ones deployed or away from home during the holidays, or people who recently went through a loss like a divorce or the death of a loved one. It's important to help those who exhibit warning signs which include irritability, fatigue, sleep disorders, indulgent eating, loss of enthusiasm and feelings of detachment and angst. People who are very stressed can feel like they're going through the motions, sometimes even getting resentful or passive aggressive, feeling like they have to maintain appearances when they're really falling apart inside. Reaching out to help someone can be the first step to getting them back on track, during the holidays and beyond.

For help, military members and their families can make use of services at their local mental health clinics by simply walking in, or use the Fleet and Family Service Centers on most military bases. You can call Military One Source at 1-800-342-9647 or Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255 (or text to 838255) or turn to a chaplain. Families can also contact TRICARE's Value Options at 800-700-8646 for mental health care in the civilian community. The hardest part sometimes is asking for help. And you'll be surprised at how much help is out there once you ask for it.

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